



Herzog on Herzog

Edited by Paul Cronin



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Paul Cronin was a researcher and translator on Faber and Faber's *Cassavetes on Cassavetes* and is the editor of two forthcoming volumes in the University of Mississippi's 'Conversations with Filmmakers' series (Errol Morris and Roman Polanski). Currently he is writing a book about cameraman Haskell Wexler for the American Society of Cinematographers, and is editing a collection of writings and lectures by director Alexander Mackendrick for Faber and Faber. His film *'Look Out Haskell, It's Real!' The Making of Medium Cool* has been screened on television and at festivals worldwide, and he is co-founder of the production company Sticking Place Films (www.thestickingplace.com).

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Introduction

"Those with "something to fall back on" invariably fail back on it. They intended to all along. That is why they provided themselves with it. But those with no alternative see the world differently."

David Mamet

'Ich möchte als Reiter fliegen, in einer blutigen Schlacht.'

[I want to fly like a rider midst the bloody tussle of war.]

The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser

Most of what you've heard about Werner Herzog is untrue. More than any other director, living or dead, the number of false rumours and downright lies disseminated about the man and his films is truly astonishing. In researching Herzog's life and work, a process that involved trawling through endless sources, it soon became clear how frequently some would contradict others. And while recently spending time with the man, I confess to having deviously longed to trip him up, find holes in his arguments, uncover a mass of contradictory statements. But to no avail, and I now conclude that either he's a master liar, or more probably, he's been telling me the truth.

Fortunately there are some basic facts that are indisputable. He was born in Munich, Germany, in 1942, and as a child lived in Sachrang, a remote mountain village near the Austrian border. He started travelling on foot at the age of fourteen and made his first phone call when he was seventeen. To finance his early films he worked the night shift as a welder in a steel factory while at school, resulting in *Herakles*, made in 1961. He directed five features starring Klaus Kinski, and Francois Truffaut once called him the most

important film director alive. But *nota bene*: he didn't direct Kinski from behind the camera with a rifle. He didn't put anyone's life at risk when making *Fitzcarraldo*. He is not insane, nor is he eccentric. His work is not in the tradition of the German romanticists. And he is not a megalomaniac. Rather, he's an extremely pleasant, generous and modest man who happens to be blessed with extraordinary vision and intuitive intelligence. A fierce sense of humour too that can leave you reeling, and as such written interviews with the man can be seriously inadequate. For example, how to transcribe the following with the playfully sardonic tone with which it was told? 'I remember having a public discussion with the diminutive Agnès Varda, who seemed to take offence at my postulation that a filmmaker, rather than having this or that quality, should be able to clear his or her own height. She didn't like that very much.'

Yet Herzog's body of work of forty-five films (eleven features, the rest 'documentaries') is no joke, one of the most important in post-war European cinema and perhaps the key to what is known as the New German Cinema. *Signs of Life* (1968) is a wonderfully assured first feature which introduced to us the classic Herzog anti-hero: maniacal, isolated and dangerous. In 1970 the Left accused him of fascism when, he explains, 'instead of promoting the inevitable world revolution I ridiculed it' in *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, the bizarre tale of rebellious dwarfs taking over the asylum. His 1971 film *Land of Silence and Darkness* tells the story of the deaf and blind Fini Straubinger and remains one of the finest 'documentaries' ever made, while his international breakthrough came in 1972 with *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, Herzog's first collaboration with actor Klaus Kinski, who plays a crazed Conquistador leading his men downriver on a raft to their doom in search of El Dorado.

In 1974 Herzog cast Bruno S., a forty-year-old shell of a man who had spent most of his life institutionalized, as the sixteen-year-old Kaspar Hauser in *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* and hypnotized his entire cast during the shooting of *Heart of Glass* two years later. He rushed to a volcanic Caribbean island about to explode to film *La Soufrière*, paid homage to F. W. Murnau in his version of *Nosferatu* (1979) and in 1982 dragged a boat over a mountain in the middle of the Amazon jungle for *Fitzcarraldo*. More recently Herzog has developed an extraordinary body of 'documentary' work by showing us the burning oil-wells of Kuwait in *Lessons of*

Darkness, telling the story of Carlo Gesualdo (Prince of Venosa, sixteenth-century musical genius and multiple murderer) in *Death for Five Voices*, and exploring the life of Vietnam POW survivor Dieter Dengler in *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*. Over the past twenty years he has also directed over a dozen operas across Europe and the Americas, has published several volumes of prose, and has appeared in several films as an actor.

As a film director his place in cinema history is assured. And when it comes to the man himself, I could find nothing more incisive than this comment from Herzog's own mother: 'When he was in school, Werner never learned anything. He never read the books he was supposed to read, he never studied, he never knew what he was supposed to know, it seemed. But in reality, Werner always knew everything. His senses were remarkable. If he heard the slightest sound, ten years later he would remember it precisely, he would talk about it, and maybe use it some way. But he is absolutely unable to explain anything. He knows, he sees, he understands, but he cannot explain. That is not his nature. Everything goes into him. If it comes out, it comes out transformed.'

Herzog is a figure sorely underappreciated in his native Germany and has been somewhat ignored in English-language film scholarship. As such, this is a book that has been screaming to be written for years, the primary obstacle having been Herzog himself. Two years ago, when I first contacted him about the possibility of this book, I received a handwritten fax. It read: 'I do not do self-scrutiny. I do look into the mirror in order to shave without cutting myself, but I do not know the color of my eyes. I do not want to assist in a book on me.' So *Herzog on Herzog* could never have been edited by an academic or aesthete, for this is a film director who does not respond well to deep ideological and critical investigations into his work. 'When you question someone about his child, you don't wonder about the way it was born,' he wrote to me last year. 'So why do this with a film?'

The conversations in this book take a chronological approach as each film - from *Herakles* in 1962 to *Invincible* in 2001 - is discussed in turn. The text also provides a forum for Herzog's well-honed takes on the things, ideas and people that have preoccupied him for so many years. An overtly analytical approach has been forgone in favour of what is a very practically orientated text and

one which I hope gives new meaning to that oft-cited Nietzsche quote, 'All writing is useless that is not a stimulus to activity.' I am also conscious of the fact that there are very few people out there who have seen every single Herzog film, and as such have attempted to edit our conversations so that even if the reader hasn't seen the film under discussion, there will still be something immediate and tangible to appreciate: a story or anecdote maybe, which in turn might lead to a theme or - to use Herzog's own language - something more 'ecstatic' even than that.

Most of our time together was spent in January and February 2001 in London where Herzog was doing post-production on *Invincible*. In January 2002 we sat down once again in Munich, and then a month later in Los Angeles. The resulting text presented here has been cut down from a much longer manuscript, as the more 'confessional' elements, and those not directly related to the films themselves, were excised. Herzog has always been careful to make a distinction between what is 'private' and what is 'personal', and anything that was not directly related to the films was sliced away. What's more, over the course of our lengthy talks we would often repeatedly touch on the same subjects from different angles, and so Herzog's answers have been compiled into single responses which has sometimes resulted in lengthy responses to very short questions. 'You should let the readers know this,' Herzog told me. 'I sound so talkative in the book, but I'm really not that garrulous.'

Several months ago, as I was in the thick of editing the transcripts, I spoke to Herzog on the phone. 'When will the book be ready?' he asked. 'You must do the five-day version. It doesn't need structure, it needs *life*! Leave the gaps in it, leave it porous. Shake the structure out and just write the book.' Well, I (kind of) did this, but still feel the text has structure - and much life - to it. And though it is impossible to capture a man's life in 300 pages, though there remain so many things left unsaid (or at least unpublished) about Herzog's life and work, though the man is, for me, only slightly more discernible now than he was when I first met him, I do feel *Herzog on Herzog* fairly successfully captures the ideas, insights and sensibilities of this important film director.

Through my research for this book I found excuses to travel to some of my favourite cities and visit some extraordinary libraries and archives. Thanks are due to library staff at the following

institutions who provided invaluable assistance: the British Film Institute, London; the Cinémathèque Québécoise, Montreal; the Norsk Filminstitut, Oslo; the Danske Filminstitut, Copenhagen; the Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film, Munich; the Film Museum, Berlin; the Cinémathèque Royale, Brussels; the Cinémathèque Municipale, Luxembourg; the Cinémathèque Suisse, Lausanne; and the Filmmuseum, Amsterdam. Thanks also to staff at the German Historical Institute, London; the Imperial War Museum Library, London; the Bibliothèque du Film, Paris; the Center for Motion Picture Study at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles; the New York Library of the Performing Arts; and the Film Study Center of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Special thanks to Lucki Stipetic, Monika Kostinek and Irma Strehle at Werner Herzog Filmproduktion, Munich.

My own time with Herzog has been nothing if not challenging (this is the best of all possible adjectives), and brings Chekhov (via Mamet) to mind:

ASTROV: This or that, that we're living, you know, is our *life*.
(*Pause.*)

IVAN PETROVICH: It is?

ASTROV : Quite.

On a personal note I owe much to those who have been supportive of this project, whether they know it or not: Ian Bahrami, Joe Bini, Ray Carney, Susan Daly, Walter Donohue, Jay Douglas, Roger Ebert, Lizzie Francke, Snorre Fredlund, Jeremy Freeson, Herb Golder, Marie-Antoinette Guillochon, Remi Guillochon, Lena Herzog, Martje Herzog, Rudolph Herzog, David Horrocks, Richard Kelly, Harmony Korine, Peter-Pavel Kraljic, Tatjana Kraljic, Joshua Kronen, Howie Movshovitz, Julius Ratjen, S. F. Said, P. Adams Sitney, Gavin Syevens, Amos Vogel, Kate Ward, Haskell Wexler and Peter Whitehead.

Special thanks to Werner for his time and vision. This book is for Abby, David and Jonathan, without whom my work over the years would have been impossible.

Paul Cronin
London
March 2002

Facing the stark alternative to see a book on me compiled from dusty interviews with all the wild distortions and lies, or collaborating - I choose the much worse option: to collaborate.

Werner Herzog
Los Angeles
February 2002

1. The Shower Curtain

Before we start, are there any philosophical insights you'd like to give your readers so they might sleep easier at nights?

Well, let me say just this, something for human beings everywhere, whether they be filmmakers or otherwise. I can answer your question only by quoting hotel mogul Conrad Hilton, who was once asked what he would like to pass on to posterity. 'Whenever you take a shower, always make sure the curtain is inside the tub,' he said. So I sit here and recommend to people the same. Never *ever* forget the shower curtain.

When did you first realize that filmmaking was something you were going to spend your life doing?

From the moment I could think independently I knew I was going to make films. I never had a choice about becoming a director. This became clear to me within a few dramatic weeks at the age of fourteen when I began to travel on foot and converted to the Catholic faith. After a long series of failures it was only a small step into filmmaking, even though to this day I have problems seeing it as a real profession.

You're known as a filmmaker who likes to explore far-flung corners of the world. When did you start to travel?

Even before I had officially left school I lived in Manchester for a few months, a place I was drawn to because of a girlfriend. I bought a run-down house in the slums of the city together with four people from Bengal and three people from Nigeria. It was one

of those nineteenth-century terrace houses built for the working class; the back yard was full of debris and garbage, and the house was full of mice. That is where I learned English. Then, at the age of nineteen, immediately after my final school exams in 1961, I left Munich for Greece and drove a truck as part of a convoy to Athens. From there I went to the island of Crete where I made some money and then took a boat to Alexandria in Egypt with the intention of travelling to the Belgian Congo. By that time the Congo had won its independence and almost immediately the deepest anarchy and the darkest violence had set in. I am fascinated by the idea that our civilization is like a thin layer of ice upon a deep ocean of chaos and darkness, and that in this country everything overwhelmingly dangerous had come into the open. Only later did I learn that of those who had made it to the most dangerous Eastern Congolese provinces at the time, almost all had perished.

So where did you go from Alexandria?

I travelled basically along the Nile to the Sudan, and today I thank God on my knees that on the way to Juba, not too far from Eastern Congo, I became very sick. I knew that to survive I had to get back as quickly as possible, and luckily I made it back up to Aswan. At that time the dam was still under construction. The Russians had built the concrete foundations and there were lots of German engineers working on the electrical intestines of the dam. One of them found me after I had taken shelter in a tool shed. I had a very high fever and did not even know how long I had been there. I have only very blurred recollections of it all. Rats bit me on my elbow and in my armpit, and apparently they *wanted to use the* wool from my sweater for a nest because when I stretched out I discovered a huge hole. I remember being woken by one rat who ran up and bit me on the cheek, and then saw it scurry away into a corner. The wound didn't heal for many weeks and I still have the scar.

I finally made it back to Germany where I eventually made my first couple of films. Once in a while I did show up at Munich university, where I was supposed to be studying history and literature, but I certainly cannot claim to have been a very serious student. I hated literature at school but kind of enjoyed listening to one

woman professor at the university who was very intelligent and demanding. I know she gave me certain insights that I am very glad to have now.

How did your parents react to your plans to become a filmmaker?

We should not speak of parents in the plural, since my father never played a part in my life. But in August 1961 my mother, Elizabeth, sent me two letters - on consecutive days - which I received when I was on Crete. In them she wrote that my father, Dietrich, was anxious to dissuade me from becoming a film director, as before leaving Munich apparently I had made some pronouncement that I was going to do just that upon my return. I had already written several screenplays and had submitted various proposals to producers and TV stations from the age of about fourteen or fifteen. But my father was quite convinced that my idealism would be crushed within a few years because he thought I would never achieve what I wanted to. He thought I did not have the energy or perseverance and sense for business to survive in the intrigue and hard milieu of the film business.

What was your mother's attitude?

My mother took a more sensible approach. She was not dissuasive like my father, rather she tried to give me a realistic idea of what I was getting myself into and what might be a wise move. She explained to me what was going on economically in West Germany at the time and in the letters she asked me to think about my future very carefully. 'It's too bad that we never talked about it in detail,' she wrote. But my mother was always very supportive. I would run away from school and disappear for weeks at a time and she would not know where I was; sensing that I would be away for a time, she would immediately write a letter to school saying I had pneumonia. She realized that I was one of those who should not be kept in school indefinitely. On several *occasions* I would walk and hitch-hike to northern Germany, staying in abandoned houses or villas if no one was around, and got very good at getting into these places without leaving a trace.

In these letters my mother tried to convince me to return to Germany so I could start an apprenticeship she had set up for me

in a photographer's lab. I had to get back by September so as not to miss another year. For her the rush was on. She had spoken to an employment expert who told her that filmmaking was a difficult profession to break into and that because I had only high-school exams I should start in a photo lab. After that I could move up to a movie lab, which he said would be the basis to start as an assistant director in a film company. But I had something else in mind and could not be persuaded.

You were born in 1942 in Munich, the largest city in Bavaria. What was it like growing up in the immediate post-war era?

A couple of days after I was born, the house next door to us in Munich was destroyed by a bomb and our place was damaged. We were lucky to get out alive - my cradle was sprayed with flying glass - so my mother moved me and my brothers out of the city to Sachrang, a small mountain village on the German-Austrian border. The Kaisergebirge mountains in the Austria Tyrol and around Sachrang were one of the last pockets of resistance in Germany at the end of the war, one of the final *places* the occupying American soldiers moved into. At that time the SS¹ and the "Werewolves"² were on the run and passed through the village, hiding their weapons and uniforms under the farmers' hay before finding refuge in the mountains. As a child I was very aware of the border between Germany and Austria as a result of my mother often taking me and my elder brother across to Wildbichl in Austria. She used the two of us to help smuggle various things back to Germany, the things that could not be found on our side of the border. In the post-war period smuggling was quite an accepted thing to do; even the police were involved in it.

My childhood was totally separate from the outside world. As a child I knew nothing of cinema, and even telephones did not exist for me. A car was an absolute sensation. Sachrang was such an isolated place at that time - though it is only about an hour and a half's drive from Munich - that I did not know what a banana was until I was twelve and I did not make my first telephone call until I was seventeen. Our house had no water-flushed toilet, in fact no running water at all. We had no *mattresses*; *my* mother would stuff dried ferns into a linen bag and in winter it

was so cold I would wake up in the morning to find a layer of ice on my blanket from frozen breath. But it was wonderful to grow up like that. We had to invent our own toys, we were full of imagination, and the guns and arms we found - remnants of the SS soldiers - just became part of what we owned. As a boy I was part of the local gang and invented some kind of flat sailing arrow which you would throw with a whip-like action, which made it sail more than 600 feet. A wonderful invention. Very difficult to aim, but it would sail on and on and on. We invented an entire world around us. Part of me has never really adjusted to the things I find around me even today. I am still not very good on the phone. I jump whenever it rings.

It might sound bizarre to people today, but things like our discovery of the arms cache made for a wonderful childhood. Everyone thinks that growing up in the ruins of the cities was a terrible experience, and for the parents who lost absolutely everything I have no doubt that it was. But for the children it truly was the most marvellous of times. Kids in the cities took over whole bombed-out blocks and would declare the remnants of buildings their own to play in where great adventures were acted out. You really do not have to commiserate with these kids. Everyone I know who spent their early childhood in the ruins of post-war Germany raves about that time. It was anarchy in the best sense of the word. There were no ruling fathers around and no rules to follow. We had to invent everything from scratch.³

What are your earliest memories?

I have two very distinct early memories. One is of the bombing of Rosenheim one night. My mother ripped me and my brother out of bed and carried both of us, wrapped in a blanket, one boy in each arm, up the slope behind our house. In the distance we could see the entire sky of orange and red. She said to us, 'Boys, I took you out of bed. You must see this. The city of Rosenheim is burning.' For us Rosenheim was the big city at the very end of the world. There was a valley and twelve kilometres away at the end of the valley was Aschau, where there was a hospital and a train station, and beyond that was Rosenheim. That was somehow the limit of my universe. Of course as a child I never went

as far as Rosenheim. Apparently what happened was that bombers had flown into Italy, could not drop their bombs because of bad visibility, and flying back over the Alps dropped them on the first place they could clearly see so they did not return loaded.⁴

The second very vivid memory is of seeing Our Lord himself. It was on Santa Claus Day, the 6 December, when Santa Claus appears with a book listing all your misdeeds of the year, accompanied by a demon-like figure, Krampus. The front door to the house opened and suddenly a man stood there. I must have been about three and fled under the couch and peed my pants. He was wearing brown overalls, no socks and had oily hands. He looked at me so kindly and was so gentle, Right away I knew it was the Lord himself! I later found out he was a guy from the electricity company who happened to be passing.

One thing that my mother once told me was that I fell quite ill when I was five or six. We could not call an ambulance because even if we did manage to get hold of one, we were too deeply snowed in. So my mother wrapped me in blankets, tied me on a sled and pulled me all night to Aschau where I was admitted to hospital. She visited me eight days later, coming on foot through deep snow. I do not remember this, but she was so amazed that I was absolutely without complaint. Apparently I had pulled a single piece of thread from the blanket on the bed and for eight *days had* played with it. I was not bored: this thread was full of stories and fantasies for me.

Bavaria was in the American zone of occupation. Do you remember the US soldiers?

Sure. I remember the jeeps driving in and thinking that this was all the Americans in the whole world, though it was only about sixty-five of them. The GIs all drove with one leg dangling out on the bumper and they all had chewing gum. And for the first time I saw a black man. I was totally mesmerised because I had only heard about black people from fairytales. He was a big wonderful man with a tremendous voice. I can still hear it today. I would speak with him for hours, and one time my mother asked me how I managed to communicate with him. She said that I replied, 'We talk in

American.' Once he gave me some chewing gum which I kept for a whole year, continuously chewing it. Of course, we were constantly hungry and looking for food, and this is one reason why I felt such a connection to Dieter Dengler many years later. In *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* he talks about peeling the wallpaper from the walls of bombed-out houses. His mother would cook it because there were nutrients in the glue. This is something we never needed to do; things were not quite that bad for us. One time I stumbled across some workers who had shot a crow and cooked it in a pot next to the road. For the first time in my life I saw an eye of fat floating on the surface of the water. Never before had I seen fat like that, it really was quite a *sensation*. With one of the sub-machine guns we had found in the forests around town I tried to shoot a crow too but never succeeded. I was thrown to the ground by the recoil, and my mother - who knew how to shoot a gun - was, contrary to my expectations, not angry and did not punish me. Instead she took the gun and said, 'Let me show you how to use this.' She taught me how to secure it and unload it, and even took me into the forest and shot a single round into a thick beechwood log. The bullet went straight through and I remember splinters of wood flying out of the other side. She said to me, 'This is what you should expect from a gun, so you must never point even a wooden or plastic gun at anybody.' I was so stunned by the violence of it that I was immediately cured of my preoccupation with these kinds of things, and since that day I have not even pointed my finger at anybody.

What were you like as a child?

I was very much a loner. I learned how to concentrate by necessity because in Munich the whole family lived together in just one room. There were four of us in this tiny place, each doing their own thing. I would lie on my back on the floor with a book and read for hours no matter how much talking and activity was going on. Often I would read all day long, and when I finished, I would look up to discover that everyone else had left hours ago.

It was my older brother Tilbert who really took charge once we moved to Munich. He did not like school and was thrown out

after a couple of years, and he *immediately started* in business, very quickly rising like a comet through the ranks. By the age of sixteen he was the main breadwinner in the family, and only because of him was I able to continue in school, even though I would work myself when I could. I owe a great deal to him. My younger brother Lucki is someone with whom I have worked very closely over the years. We have different fathers, but for me he is a full brother. He had great musical talent as a youngster but quickly realized he would not be good enough to compete with the slew of other pianists out there and went into business, he too rising like a comet. I think this *scared* him because he soon took off to Asia for a while, visiting India, Burma, Nepal and Indonesia. I wrote him a letter asking for help making *Aguirre*, and he *crossed the* Pacific and made it to Peru to give us much needed assistance. Finally he started to work with me full-time and has run my film-production company since then.

Is Herzog your real name?

In my parents' divorce my legal name became Stipetic, which was my mother's maiden name. Herzog means 'duke' in German and I thought there should be someone like Count Basie or Duke Ellington making films. Whatever protects me from the overwhelming evil of the universe.

What were the first films you saw?

There was a travelling projectionist for remote provincial schools who would bring a selection of 16-mm films with him, and when I was eleven I saw my first two films. Even though I was quite stunned that this kind of thing was possible, I was not very taken with the first film, which was about Eskimos building an igloo. It had a very ponderous commentary and was very boring, and I could tell that the Eskimos were not doing a very good job. The *second* film *about pygmies* building a liana bridge across a jungle river in Cameroon was a bit better. The pygmies worked very well and I was very impressed that they could build such a well-functioning bridge without any real tools. You saw one of the pygmies swinging across the river on a liana just like Tarzan and they were hanging from the suspension bridge like spiders. It was

a sensational experience for me and I still like the pygmies for having done it that way.

Later we watched *Zorro*, *Tarzan* and *Dr Fu Manchu*, things like that. Most of them were cheap American B-movies, though one of the *Fu Manchu* films was a moment of revelation for me. In this film a guy is shot and falls sixty feet from a rock, does a somersault in mid-air and then a little kick with his leg. Ten minutes later the exact same shot appeared in another gun battle, and I recognized it because of this little kick. They had recycled it and thought they could get away with it. I spoke to my friends about this and asked them how it was possible the same shot had been used twice. Before this *moment* I thought it was some kind of reality I had been watching on screen, that the film was something like a documentary. All of a sudden I could see how the film was being narrated and edited, how tension and suspense were created, and from that day on cinema was something different for me.

You've often spoken of your admiration of F. W. Murnau's films. When did you first see the German Expressionist Weimar films of the 1910s?

I never saw any of those films as a child. In fact, I did not see the Expressionist films until after I heard Lotte Eisner⁵ talk in Berlin many years later.

Did you ever get a chance to see any of the avant-garde work that was being done at the time?

I do recall that when I was about twenty-one a young man named P. Adams Sitney⁶ came to Germany and brought with him a good many reels of film, things like Stan Brakhage⁷ and Kenneth Anger.⁸ I was very impressed that there were so many other films out there very different to what I was used to seeing in the cinema. It did not even matter to me that I could tell these were not the kinds of images that I myself wanted to work with. Seeing that there were very bold people out there doing things that were so unexpectedly different intrigued me so much that I wrote about them and visionary filmmaking, and then asked a film magazine to publish the article, which they did in 1964.⁹

I showed you a list that a British critic compiled of the 100 best films ever made and was quite surprised how many of them you hadn't even heard of, let alone seen.

I am not really what you would call cinematically literate, not compared to many film directors. I average maybe one film a month and that is usually at a film festival where I will see them all at once. I might recall a film I saw years ago and still ache with pain about how beautiful it is. When I see a great film it stuns me, it is a mystery for me. What constitutes poetry, depth, vision and illumination in cinema I cannot name. It is the bad films that have really taught me about cinema. The negative definition: for God's sake don't do it like that. The sins are easy to name.

This also applies to my own films. My most immediate and radical lesson came from what was my first blunder, *Herakles*. It was a good thing to have made this little film first - rather than jump into something much more meaningful to me - because from that moment on I had a much better idea as to how I should go about my business. Learning from your mistakes is the only real way to learn.

Can you talk more about the intense religious period you went through?

Like I said earlier, I had a dramatic religious phase at the age of fourteen and converted to Catholicism. Even though I am not a member of the Catholic church any longer, to this day there seems to be something of a distant religious echo in some of my work. Also at the age of fourteen I started to travel on *foot for* the first time. I wanted to go to Albania, that mysterious country which was completely closed off to the rest of the world at that time, but they would not let me in. So I walked as far as the Adriatic, keeping close to the Albanian-Yugoslavian frontier all the time, maybe fifty metres at most. I never dared enter Albania though. It was my first real escape from home life.

You set up your own production company at a very early age. In fact every single film you've made - including the early shorts - has been produced through Werner Herzog Filmproduktion. What motivated you to take such an active role in producing?

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